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# Is better to be a *kayayei* than to be unemployed: reflecting on the role of head portering in ghana's informal economy

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**Abstract** The implementation of neoliberal economic reforms with its resultant effects on rural agricultural economies has facilitated the migration of young girls from northern to southern Ghana to seek for alternative livelihoods in the urban informal economy as head porters (Kayayei). Using semi-structured questionnaires and interviews with 45 Kayayei in Makola and Agboghloshie Markets, Accra, this study examines how migration as a livelihood strategy contributes to an improvement in the living conditions of young girls and their families. The paper also looks more closely into the pathways through which the livelihoods of these young female migrants may contribute to local economic development. The study highlights that Kayayei contribute to local economic development through market exchange and revenue generation, also there is significant perceived positive impact of head portering on

standard of living of these young girls through improved access to income, health care and asset accumulation while their families benefit from remittances. The study concludes by advocating for the need to provide access to credit and skills training in enhancing the livelihood of Kayayei.

**Keywords** Migration · Livelihoods · Remittances · Head porters (Kayayei) · Standard of living · Ghana

## Introduction

Ghana's major cities have some of the largest markets in West Africa, and the vibrant trade that takes place in the crowded alleys of kiosks and stalls is supported by a peculiar niche economy—that of female young migrants who go into head portering (known as *Kayayei*). *Kayayo* (singular) is a female who carries objects for others usually in head pans for a negotiated fee. The term is derived from the Hausa language, *Kaya*, meaning load/goods and the Ga language; *Yei* meaning females “as the role is almost exclusively carried out by females” (Yeboah et al. 2014: 22).

Many girls aged about 15 years upwards carry goods in large metallic head pans to serve businesses in narrow lanes, often developing relationships with specific stalls or businesses. Many of these girls are young Muslim migrants from the poorer regions of northern Ghana, who migrate to escape poverty at

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home or save money for dowry, but are very vulnerable in their new urban environment.

Indeed, the reduced role of the government in employment creation together with the removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs as part of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the 1980s and early 1990s has pushed many people especially young girls who migrate to seek alternative livelihoods in the already choked informal sector in urban areas (Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Obeng-Odoom 2012). Rural young migrants particularly females are attracted to urban areas mainly as a result of the perceived employment opportunities, higher earnings and better social services (Hilson 2013; Roberts 2013).

In spite of these potential benefits that their migration may afford them, the plethora of literature on young female migrants—particularly, *Kayayei* have focused primarily on their vulnerabilities and lack of social protection which poses significant economic, social, political and cultural challenges (Heintz and Pickbourn 2012; Elgin and Oyvat 2013). Indeed young females who migrate from northern to southern cities of Ghana to pursue various livelihood portfolios in the informal economy have been a subject of intense research over the last 15 years. The avalanche of scholarly work that exist on these groups to the best of our knowledge have focused mostly on the risks associated with their livelihood strategies and the dangerous and abusive situations in which they find themselves (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Yeboah et al. 2014).

We take cognisance of the fact that many of the *Kayayei* in urban cities of Accra and Kumasi have poor living conditions in terms of nutrition, healthcare, education, sanitation and accommodation. Others suffer from diverse risks including verbal, physical and sexual abuse (Kwankye et al. 2009). However there is relatively little empirical research on the meaning and social context of young females' movement for work, the potential contributions that their livelihoods may have for local economic development and how such livelihoods influence positively on their living conditions and that of their left-behind families. Up to date research on young females' migration for head portering in Ghana is largely skewed toward the negative circumstances that confront them in their destinations, creating a gap in knowledge of the role that their livelihood portfolios may contribute

positively to their standard of living<sup>1</sup> and that of their kins up north. Our research seeks to fill this lacuna. Whitehead and Hashim (2005) for instance have cautioned the sweeping generalisations being made about the lives of young migrants including those who migrate to engage in the occupation of head portering. The authors argue that the social context of the vulnerabilities and the effects of their migration will depend *inter alia* on several issues. These include the kind of work that they find to do in their destinations, the factors triggering their movement, the kind of living situation they find themselves, dangers and hazards posed by intermediaries, bad employers as well as the supportive mechanisms available for them. The implication is that not all young female migrants may experience hardship and poor living conditions and even if they do, there may be some positive connotations especially with respect to those who get employed in the informal sector.

In what follows, we present the account of 45 young females who have migrated from northern to southern Ghana with respect to their livelihood strategies, particularly the role that they play in Ghana's informal market system. Additionally, the paper provides a framework of reference for further research on the discourse of female labour migration. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) in Ghana makes particularly interesting case study of the livelihoods of young female migrants as it serve as the principal destination for migrants from the three northern regions of Ghana. New industries and economic activities in the informal economy in Accra has created job opportunities and booming job prospects, stimulating the shift of labour especially female migrants from rural northern Ghana to the urban areas of Accra (Wrigley-Asante 2014).

While the evidence of the poor and abusive situations confronting *Kayayei* in the informal economy may hold, we find data to support the fact that the

<sup>1</sup> Standard of living is defined as the ability of an individual to meet the basic necessities of life such as access to health care, education and material well-being (Bérenger and Verdier-Chouchane 2007). Previous measurements on standards of living have mostly focused on consumption aggregates due to the difficulty of measuring household income (Guenard and Mesple-Soms 2010). However, human development is multi-dimensional and goes beyond income and consumption to include health, education and access to resources or material well-being.

livelihood portfolios of these young girls play a crucial role in supporting local economic development through addressing market transportation gaps, assisting in market exchange as well as contribute to the generation of local revenue to city authorities in financing development initiatives in the city of Accra. Additionally, head portering significantly contribute to improving the standard of living of young female migrants through employment creation which provides a means for improved access to income, health care and durable asset accumulation. The paper further shows that remittances sent by *Kayayei* to their kins up north contribute to improving the living conditions of their families. The novelty of our study lies in its potential contribution in deepening our understanding concerning the livelihoods of young female migrants and their engagement in the informal economy which is mired by discussions on their challenges. We see this work to be important especially in the wake where research have tended to focus largely on the vulnerabilities confronting these porters to the neglect of the positive engagement that their livelihoods offer to the economy, their families and themselves. We conclude that the policy space to make recommendations on young females who migrate to engage in *Kayayei* in the informal economy will require more research on diverse aspects of their lives.

The remaining paper proceeds in the following manner. The succeeding section provides the theoretical context for the study. We then contextualise Ghana's *Kayayei*, which is the principal occupation undertaken by a growing number of female migrants from northern to southern Ghana. The research methodology and study area are outlined in the third section. The penultimate section of the paper presents the findings and discussions followed by a summary of the main arguments and its policy ramification for future research and development.

## Theoretical context

Our framework for unpacking the positive aspects of young female migrants (*Kayayei*) in Ghana's informal economy dwells largely on the migration and livelihoods literature. A livelihood consists of the capabilities, assets and activities for a means of living (Chambers and Conway 1992). A livelihood analysis captures and examines the complex web of activities

and interactions that express the ways people make a living through a portfolio of activities (Scoones 2009). Livelihood approaches are useful in integrating the diverse elements through which households employ a range of assets to pursue diverse strategies in constructing a living in specific context (Ellis 2000).

Physiologically, migration refers to the movement of persons from one geographical location to the other. The nature of the movement is varied and can take several forms including forced or voluntary, seasonal or permanent, international or internal. The attention in migration scholarship has concentrated on international movement, although available statistics indicate that internal migrants far outnumber international migrants<sup>2</sup> (UNDESA 2013). This paper focuses on internal migration of young females moving from northern to southern cities of Ghana to engage in head portering.

Migration has been recognised as a key livelihood diversification strategy employed by both poor and non-poor households (UNDP 2009; De Haan 2012) where labour movement is central to maximising the earnings of the household economy while mitigating the possible losses through diversification, or a risk coping mechanism where people move between regions in order to cope with entitlement failure such as landlessness or other unforeseen circumstances. Winkles (2004) argues that migration as a livelihood activity potentially includes elements of both risk aversion and wealth accumulation, which has effects on the perils that may face households. In the context of livelihoods, migration is seen as a deliberate attempt to increase investment and the fluctuations of household income while improving rural survival strategies which are mostly dependent on the vagaries of climatic situations (De Haan 2008). Migration in effect can provide a means to acquire range of assets, response to present as well as future shocks and stress.

On the other hand migration may also entail risks. We acknowledge that migration as a diversification strategy may exacerbate the vulnerabilities, risks and dangers for young females and people in general. However, this dimension of development has sufficiently been addressed by previous research on north–south flows in Ghana (see Anarfi and Kwankye 2005;

<sup>2</sup> The available evidence shows that international migrant's number about 214 million while the estimate for internal migrants is 740 million (UNDESA 2013).

Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Ziblim 2013a; Yeboah et al. 2014), and hence outside the scope of this present study. Our framework posits that migration as a livelihood strategy could be beneficial in three distinct areas:

1. Contribute to an improvement in the standard of living of persons involved in the movement.
2. Offer as a means of meeting the needs of left behind households via remittances.
3. Contribute to local economic development in destinations through the activities and livelihood portfolios of migrants.

An important nexus identified in the narratives that link migration and livelihoods is remittances. A remittance is typically defined as moneys that follow unidirectional paths from migrants to their non-moving households in sending communities, regions and countries (Maimbo and Ratha 2005). Remittance flows to developing and transition economies have witnessed a considerable rise especially during the last decade, reaching around \$372 billion in 2011, an increase of 12.1 percent over those of 2010 which was \$351 billion (World Bank 2011). It must be emphasised that this value may be relatively underestimated, as it excludes funding flowing through informal channels. Young people have always been assumed to be passive beneficiaries of remittances mostly from adult through the use of such funds in meeting their educational and health needs. However, the likelihood of young migrants also remitting to their left behind adults relations is high since migration is thought to be positioned in the youthful stage of the lifecycles (Huijsmans 2008). However the flow of remittances from young female migrants to their families (parents) and its implications is yet to gain much attention in scholarship.

The relevance of remittances is enormous. Migrant remittances may be invested in family businesses to provide security against unforeseen circumstances. Such transfers provide households with the means of meeting their basic needs such as consumption, payment of school and health related bills among others. Ackah and Medvedev (2010) argue that migrant remittances may provide an escape route out of grinding poverty through enhanced access to health. Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf (2008) maintained that migration is an important determinant of poverty reduction, with implications for migrants and their

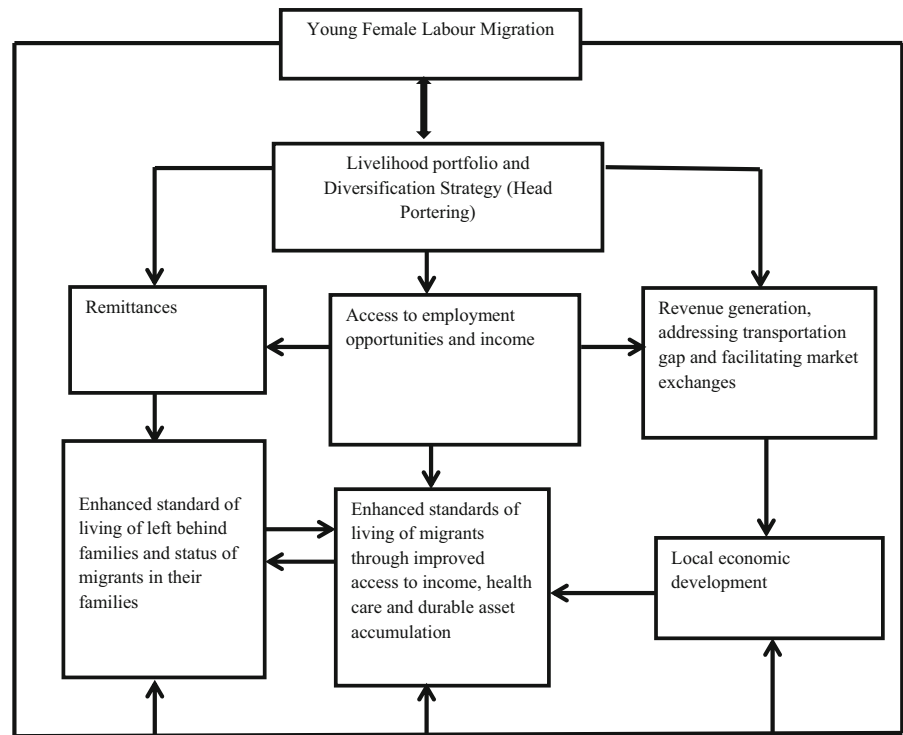
dependents. Tanle (2014) in a study in the Obuasi Municipality in Ghana found that migrants' livelihoods improved through the acquisition of assets, although the study relied on a small sample. In Ghana, north-south migration is thought to influence the livelihood status of families. Gyimah-Brempong and Asiedu (2014) have also reported that remittances significantly increase investment in children's education in northern Ghana.

The livelihoods engaged in by migrants may provide the opportunity to remit other items to family relations. Rose and Shaw (2008) argue that remittances can be goods, gifts, and services that migrants send to their households and regardless of their real value, such transfers may have both direct and indirect effects of easing the burden on the household economy in terms of meeting their basic needs. In the Ghanaian context, young migrants have been reported to remit home building materials, sewing machines, farm inputs, livestock and other items for marriage as well as personal belongings or savings which their mothers could use (Anarfi and Kwankye 2005). This implies that remittances could be much more than transfer of financial resources. The overall effect of such contributions for migrants is the increased social status and new found identities of being able to support household expenditure.

It is imperative to mention that the capacity of internal migrant's particularly female young migrants to remit more is doubtful, given that they will have to first contend with finding a job and the difficulties associated with acquiring accommodation and other socio-economic needs in their destinations. Moreover, there is also the tendency for remittances to increase spatial inequality in communities. This is because the possibility to adopt migration as a diversification strategy will inter alia depend on access to credit or resources as well as the interaction between institutions such as the market, state, and the household (Sabates-Wheeler et al. 2007). In this way, the very poor may not always have the wherewithal to move, which implies that logically, remittance flow to households of the not very poor will be limited and thus widening the inequality gap.

Aside remittances, migration as a livelihood strategy may have other potential contributions to persons involved and the broader economy at the local and national contexts. It affords migrants the opportunity to access better healthcare, education, jobs and

**Fig. 1** Migration as a livelihood strategy and its contributions to the lives of migrants, their families and local economic development



improved sanitation in the destination centres. As succinctly captured by Punch (2007: 1), migration provides opportunity for young people to “widen their lifestyle choices for their future and it enables them to engage in a more global culture by providing them with cash income required for a range of consumer goods”. Persons moving internally especially in Ghana and other developing countries may be essentially low skilled and the informal economy is the main avenue that provide opportunity in gaining employment (Adom and Williams 2014).

The livelihood portfolios of migrants may stimulate and add up to local level development in their destination areas. Although the jobs that migrants engage in at destination centres may mostly be classified as undesirable, they contribute to rendering services to local inhabitants and support local revenue generation through tax payment which are invested in

development initiatives (Bowles 2011; Porter et al. 2012).

The livelihoods of migrants in the informal economy contributes to the production, packaging and the distribution of goods and services in the urban informal economy (Porter et al. 2012), although such contributions are often ignored. A schematic summary of our theoretical reasoning is depicted diagrammatically in Fig. 1.

### Contextualising Ghana’s Kayayei

Head portering in Ghana is an ancient practice used to transport farm produce to market. Head-load portering in market areas was introduced to Ghana from the Sahelian countries of Mali and Niger (Kwankye et al. 2009) and has continued to play a major role in transporting goods in densely crowded trading areas such as markets and bus stations (Porter et al. 2012). Many markets in Ghana have been established for a long time, served by narrow, mud footpaths which are not accessible by vehicles (Baah-Ennumh and Adom-Asamoah 2012). Stallholders in these markets constantly depend on loads carried by ‘men porters’ (truck

<sup>3</sup> Truck pushers are young men who carry the loads of customers for a negotiated fee on four-wheeler trolleys instead of carrying it on their heads. Truck pushers are able to carry larger and heavier loads compared to *Kayayei* (Owusu-Ansah and Addai 2013).



pushers)<sup>3</sup> or *Kayayei* for a negotiated fee (Porter et al. 2013). Women and children have played a prominent role in head portering since the 1969 Aliens Compliance Law that resulted in expulsion of illegal foreigners many of whom worked as *Kayayei* (Kwankye et al. 2009). Today, many *Kayayei* are young girls aged 15 and 35 years (Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah 2009) who migrate from the north due to poverty, marriage pressures, and lack of employment at home (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008).

The actual number of *Kayayei* in Ghana is unknown because there is no national survey dedicated to providing data on them. However, Baah (2007) in his study found about 23,000 *Kayayei* in Kumasi. Similarly, a study in 2011 estimated that there were about 15,000 *Kayayei* in Accra (PDGFUP 2011), mainly from the three northern regions of Ghana (Fig. 2). These statistics highlight the fact that the numbers of *Kayayei* in southern Ghana is growing. Most *Kayayei* are found in Kumasi, Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi (Yeboah 2008) but the business of head portering is now found in smaller cities like Koforidua (Adom and Williams 2014) (Fig. 2).

Considering the rising cost of living in Ghanaian cities such as Accra, the earnings of *Kayayei* may be deemed as grossly inadequate especially when compared to formal sector workers. For example, in a 2014 study of 40 street hawkers and *Kayayei* in Kumasi, Yeboah et al. (2014) found that *Kayayei* earned a daily average wage of GH¢ 20–40 (US \$9.11–US \$18.21) on a very good day, while some do not earn anything on a bad day. This suggests that *Kayayei* earnings depend on the fortunes of the market. In general researchers have found that ‘men porters’ or ‘truck pushers’ earn more than *Kayayei*. For instance, Oberhauser and Yeboah (2011) in a survey of 120 migrants in Accra reported that the weekly earning of truck pushers ranged from US \$39.16 to US \$66.02 while that of *Kayayei* was US \$6.83–US \$47.81. The study by Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf (2008) on *Kayayei* in Accra found that truck pushers are able to argue over payment for services since they can carry heavy loads over longer distances, but *Kayayei* depend on the good will of customers for payment.

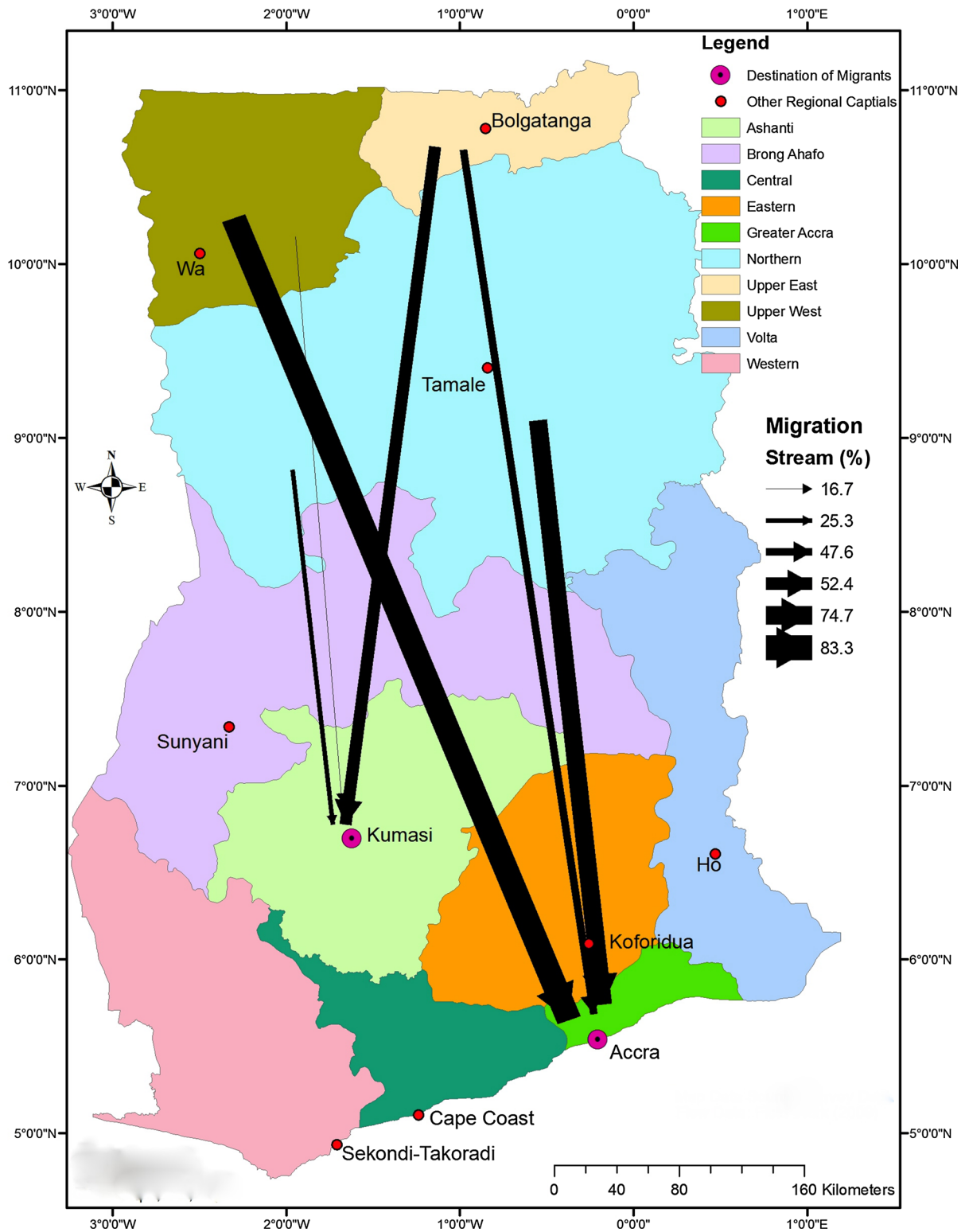
Furthermore, *Kayayei* also face an array of socio-economic difficulties in addition to violence, assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and exploitation by customers (ILO 2005). Labour exploitation of *Kayayei* is common because of the absence of written work

contracts (Yeboah et al. 2014). Many *Kayayei* work and sleep at markets places, bus terminals, on streets, or in front of stores, exposing them to the risk of sexual abuse or rape, while others exchange sex for shelter (Ziblim 2013a). This triggers the spread of sexually transmitted disease like HIV/AIDs and increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, which has the potential to affect their health and that of their babies.

Studies on *Kayayei* suggest that many live without access to electricity, water and sanitation, often in shared slum housing or sleeping rough (King and Amponsah 2012). Baah-Ennumh et al. (2012) found that about 49 % of those who subsist in slums live in wooden shacks, shops and verandas with limited access to bathrooms, kitchens or toilets. In the suburbs of Aboaba, Akwatia Line and Apagyahene (Kumasi), *Kayayei* shared rooms at an average room occupancy rate of 4–5 in wooden shacks or rented compound houses, which is above the maximum room occupancy of two persons per room as stipulated by the national housing policy (UN-Habitat 2011). This poses health threats (Ziblim 2013b), although many *Kayayei* live in extended groups for protection and social support.

Inevitably, *Kayayei* work in poor environmental conditions and are exposed to the weather (Kwankye et al. 2009), vehicular traffic or robbery (Yeboah et al. 2014) which has psycho-social effects on their health. In a study on the health effects of pedestrian head-loading in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa it was discovered that more than 70, 35 and 15 % respectively of the 3,000 respondents experience pains such as headache, neck ache, waist pain and exhaustion, with risk of acute injury and chronic musculoskeletal symptoms—and the inter-country difference was attributed partly to ‘different socio-cultural context’ (Porter et al. 2013). Although research shows that head porters experience diverse difficulties, there is the absence of social protection mechanism such as unemployment benefits within the Ghanaian informal economy in general and for *Kayayei* in particular. In this regard how they adapt to and survive in the informal economy remains an important question for researchers and development practitioners (Osei-Boateng and Ampratwum 2011).

Overall, the review on the lives of females, who migrate from northern to southern Ghana to pursue head portering (*Kayayei*) as a livelihood strategy is largely skewed towards those in abusive and diverse socio-economic difficulties. This is expected because



**Fig. 2** North–South migration patterns of *Kayaye*. Source: Adaawen and Owusu (2013)



the conceptualisation, methodologies, findings and implications of research on young migrants in general is driven by a policy agenda of protection, which are fashioned by the interest of international development agencies and governments that are the major sources of finance for such research project (Castles 2003). Thus the tendency to focus on the harm and abuses confronting female young migrants seem to be the norm of research while the benefits or opportunities afforded by their migration receive no similar consideration (Whitehead and Hashim 2005; O'Connell Davidson and Farrow 2007). While these challenges affecting young migrants demands urgent policy attention, there is relatively little direct material that examines how the livelihoods of these young girls also contribute to improvement in their living conditions and that of their left behind families as well as the pathways through which their work may add up to local socio-economic development. It is in the context of this research lacuna that we situate our study. The remaining sections focus on the methodology and findings from our work.

## Research methods and study sites

### Methods and data

For the purpose of this research, the mixed method design was employed in order to obtain a more nuanced, validated and triangulated result. According to Mengshoel (2012), the use of mixed methods helps in achieving a more valid and comprehensive findings rather than using qualitative or quantitative design separately. Thus, the combination of the two approaches benefits from the strength and limitations of each method (Johnson et al. 2007). The approach focuses on collecting, analysing and interpreting qualitative and quantitative data (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009).

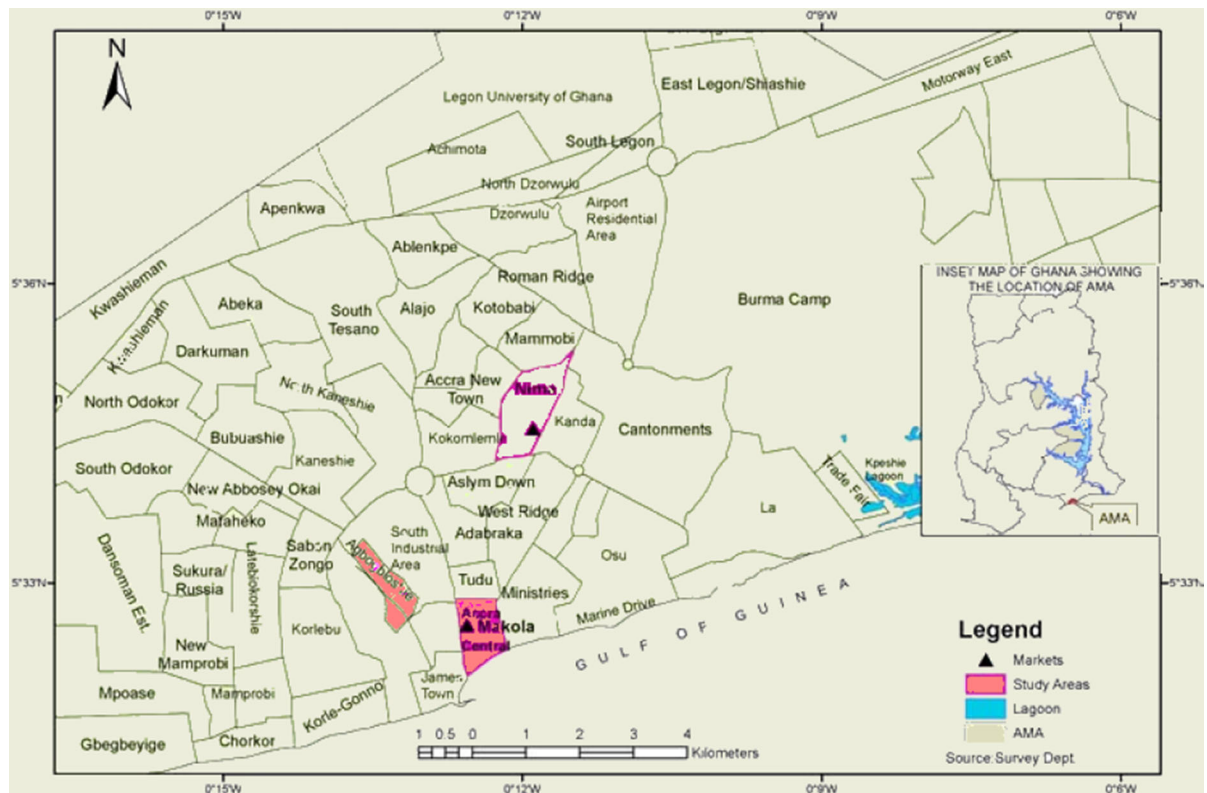
Both primary and secondary sources of data were employed in carrying out the research. Two main methods of primary data collection were used. First, a semi-structured questionnaire with 45 *Kayayei* (all being migrants from northern Ghana) in the Makola and Agboghloshie markets in the Central Business District (CBD) of Accra was conducted. The semi-structured questionnaire contained closed questions to provide quantitative data in order to establish

statistical evidence and causal relations between respondent's socio-economic background and their engagement in portering, and some open questions to give qualitative data, and learn from the respondents lived experiences and perceptions (Bryman 2012).

In selecting participants (*Kayayei*) for the study, our first point of call was on group leaders from an organisation- *Kayayei Youth Association (KYA)*—committed to improving the standard of living of *Kayayei*. These leaders assisted in recruiting the participants for the study. Key informants from the *KYA* led the enumerators to a group of *Kayayei* in the Agboghloshie and Makola markets, who in turn helped us to make the needed contact with other groups. This approach established a process of trust between interviewer and interviewee, and meant that different ethnic groups could be contacted. Indeed we take cognisance of the fact that a purposive sampling would have been the ideal sampling method to use in the selection of respondents as demonstrated in previous research on the issue at hand (Opare 2003; Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Yeboah et al. 2014). However, it was not possible to select a representative sample because of the lack of data on the population of the *Kayayei* as a whole. Thus we recognise potential problems associated with the sampling method used such as non-representational sampling or over-representation from one ethnic or language group because of the selection of respondents through networks.

In addition to interviewing female young migrants (*Kayayei*), four key informants' interviews including a) a policy official from the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) and b) three staff of non-governmental organisations working to promote the interest of *Kayayei* was conducted. This provided space to yield insight and relevant information on the topic at hand from the arena of policy officials' perspective who in diverse ways continues to spend ample time in planning and implementing interventions as well as working with the *Kayayei* in the Ghanaian context. Additionally, one expert interview with a Ghanaian academic specialising in social policy with extensive research experience working with *Kayayei* was conducted.

The data collected captured three broad areas namely; the socio-economic and biographical information of respondents; the relevance of the livelihoods of *Kayayei* in the market economy and the pathways through which head portering contributes to



**Fig. 3** Map of the AMA showing Makola and Agboghbloshie markets. *Source:* Adopted from Wrigley-Asante (2013)

improving the living conditions of those involved and their familiar relations. The quantitative data collected was analysed using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) 20.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to analyse *Kayayei* biographical information. The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews, tape recordings and field notes on the other hand were transcribed and analysed with the help of QSR NVivo 10 software. Content analysis was used in presenting the qualitative results which helped in grouping, comparing and examining the findings of the study in relation to other studies on *Kayayei* in the Ghanaian context. For ethical reasons, fictitious names were used in the data analysis.

#### Study area

The study was undertaken between July and August, 2014 in two markets; Makola and Agboghbloshie

located in the Central Business District (CBD) of the Accra Metropolitan Area (AMA) (Fig. 3). The importance of the metropolis as an administrative, industrial and commercial centre has attracted many people both from within and outside the country. It is estimated that, about 44 % of residents in Accra are migrants (Ghana Districts 2006), who are attracted by the positive cycle of economic growth and the diverse economic opportunities (Pescina 2013).

#### *The Makola market*

Makola is an open-air and the second largest market in Accra, and is easily accessible due to its central

<sup>4</sup> The Market Queen is the shortened form of 'queen mother'. The queen chairs the product associations and is known in local Akan language as *Dwamu Hema*. The position of a market queen is usually hereditary and is passed on from incumbent queen mother to her daughter (Adimabuno 2010). The queen is often replaced in case of her death or retirement making destoolment very difficult (KIT and IIRR 2008).

location (Storr 2008). The Makola No. 1 market since its establishment in 1924 has replaced the Salaga Market in importance and plays a key role in wholesale and retail activities (Robertson 1983). For instance, Robertson (1983:470) maintains that Makola market is “the centre of trade in Ghana, the chief wholesale and retail market in Accra, and the heart of a market system that evolved over centuries”.

Patronage is often high because of the abundance of fresh food and a relatively low food prices (Wrigley-Asante 2013). Both perishable and non-perishable goods are also sold in the market. Many trading sectors in the market are dominated by women from the Ga ethnic group local to Accra, often trading under the traditional leadership structure of market queens<sup>4</sup>, who are widely respected (Lyon 2007; Brown and Lyons 2010; Britwum 2013). However, the increasing globalisation and trade liberalisation experienced in the Ghanaian economy in recent years has attracted several other ethnic groups as well as foreigners to the market.

Each of the main traditional product sector associations, such as cassava, plantain, tomato and fish sellers is headed by a queen. Market associations are rooted in Ghanaian traditional and cultural norms and play an instrumental role in the control and management of competition. Product associations and structures in the market became more formalised between 1930s and 1950s, and are often managed by traders of single-sex and ethnicity (Lyons and Snoxell 2005; Brown and Lyons 2010).

‘Market queens’ play a key organisational role in the goods’ distribution chain and also advocate for their members at times of public accusations (Britwum 2013). For example, in a study of informal street traders in four countries; Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and Lesotho, Brown and Lyons (2010) found that in the New Makola Market (NMM) of Accra, Ghana, market queen of the cassava association performs key functions including mobilising funds, sourcing and negotiations in buying and distributing cassava across the market. Additionally, the queens perform welfare,

savings and loans functions as well as the daily administration and management of the market space (King 2006). They act as a direct link between the rural producers and urban consumers and queens try to maximise members’ profits (Filson et al. 2001).

However, poor infrastructure in Makola Market resulted in several fires in the early 1980s, after which the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government authorised the demolition of the Makola Market No.1 (Lyons and Snoxell 2005). This paved way for the establishment of the New Makola Market located at the outskirts of the city centre owned and managed by private individuals (Brown et al. 2010). In recent years, the new market has expanded without any proper layout (Grant and Yankson 2003). Stasik and Thiel (2014) argue that the market has outgrown the CBD, leading to a rise in transient-street vending and hawking. In addition, increasing traffic congestion in the CBD is now hindering the movement of people, goods and vehicles, creating space for a niche activity for *Kayayei* who carry the goods for shop owners and customers on their head. In the market, it is easier and faster for people to weave through traffic congestion and more convenient for customers to shop at areas inaccessible by vehicles (Kwankye et al. 2009).

### *The Agboghloshie market site and niches*

The operations of *Kayayei* also extend to satellite markets such as the Agboghloshie Market. Agboghloshie, the largest wholesale and fresh produce market in Accra is situated in the CBD. The market is adjacent to Graphic Road in the north and the slum community of Old Fadama in the south respectively, and is bordered by Korle Lagoon in the west and the Ghana Railway Corporation Terminal in the east (Codjoe et al. 2014) (Fig. 3). The market serves different categories of traders including wholesale and retail food, tomato, yam and onion sellers.

Buyers and sellers from all over the country come to the Agboghloshie market (Grant and Oteng-Ababio 2012). According to FAO (2005), the market distributes about three-quarters of tomatoes supplied in Accra. The market is also a vibrant site for ancillary commercial activities including transport, storage and repairs as it lies adjacent to the south industrial area of Accra. The government has thus established a tax collection office in the market so as to monitor trading activities, and there are also branch offices of Ecobank

<sup>4</sup> The Market Queen is the shortened form of ‘queen mother’. The queen chairs the product associations and is known in local Akan language as *Dwamu Hema*. The position of a market queen is usually hereditary and is passed on from incumbent queen mother to her daughter (Adimabuno 2010). The queen is often replaced in case of her death or retirement making destoolment very difficult (KIT and IIRR 2008).

Ghana and Merchant Bank, and several credit and saving unions (Grant and Oteng-Ababio 2012). Old Fadama is the biggest slum in Ghana with a population of around 80,000 although precise measurement is difficult (Housing the Masses 2010). The Agbogbloshie slum is another densely populated community with a population of about 15,000 (Obeng-Odoom 2014). Sanitation conditions and access to water in the market and its adjoining areas such as Old Fadama, Agbogbloshie slum and Konkomba<sup>5</sup> are known to be very poor (Monney et al. 2013). The area in front of Agbogbloshie Market serves as the dumping site for electronic waste, making the market one of the largest recycling sites for electronic waste site in Accra (Huang et al. 2014).

As Old Fadama is an informal settlement, it is often disregarded in the planning and development agenda of city officials. In recent years, plans have been made to relocate the community but government level of commitment has been weak (Kanton et al. 2010) and has therefore become the 'slum of controversy' in Ghana (Grant and Oteng-Ababio 2012). Traffic congestion around Agbogbloshie Market is extensive, providing considerable potential for *Kayayei*.

## Results and discussion

### Socio-demographic characteristics of *kayayei*

Before going into the main issues of the paper it will be useful to provide the results on the socio-demographic results obtained on the sample of *Kayayei* selected. Results on the socio-demographic characteristics of 45 *Kayayei* are presented in Table 1. These include information on the market of operation, region of out-migration, ethnicity, age, marital status, religion and educational attainment. The sample included 25 (55.6 %) respondents from Makola market and 20 (44.4 %) from Agbogbloshie market. The selection of the larger sample in Makola was due to its large size (Robertson 1983). In both markets there were special

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of the Socio-economic demographics of respondents (n = 45)

Socio-economic variable	Frequency	Percentage
Market of operation		
Makola	25	55.6
Agbogbloshie	20	44.6
Total	45	100.0
Region of origin		
Upper East	14	31.1
Upper West	8	17.8
Northern	23	51.1
Total	45	100.0
Age		
Below 10 years	0	0
11–20 years	21	46.7
21–30	19	42.2
31–40	5	11.1
Above 40 years	–	–
Total	45	100.0
Marital status		
Single	20	44.4
Married	21	46.7
Divorced	2	4.4
Informal union/Betrothal	2	4.4
Total	45	100.0
Number of children		
1–2	10	22.2
3–4	11	24.6
5–7	4	8.6
None	20	44.6
Total	45	100.0
Educational level		
Primary school	4	8.9
Junior high/middle school	13	28.9
Senior high/vocational school	6	13.3
Non formal education	22	48.9
Total	45	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2014

niches such as vegetables, cooking oil, yams, fish and clothes among many others.

In terms of region of origin, survey results indicate that about 51.1 and 17.8 % of respondents migrated from the Northern and Upper West regions respectively (Table 1). As suggested by earlier researchers, head portering has become an occupational niche for female migrants from Northern regions (Agarwal et al.

<sup>5</sup> Konkomba and Old Fadama refers are the shanty suburbs surrounding the Agbogbloshie market. These places serve as the primary destination for migrants from northern Ghana. It is usually referred to as Sodom and Gomorrah (Nyametso 2012) by government officials in order to legitimize their eviction plans (associating the settlement with perceived crime and licentiousness) (see Farouk and Owusu 2012; Paller 2012).

1997). The tribes in the northern regions practice patrilineal inheritance. The engagement of young girls in head portering is partly due to the 'social structures of constraints' noted by Folbre (1994), which limits their opportunities. Many of the *Kayayei* in the Makola and Agboghloshie markets were Mamprusi or Dagombas, demonstrating their dependence on ethnic space especially for networking and survival. As Agarwal et al. (1997) comment, the livelihoods of head porters are mostly framed within the context of social identities (ethnicity).

However, this finding contradicts that of an earlier study by Yeboah (2008) who found that most *Kayayei* are of Dagomba origin. It is worth noting that the results presented by earlier researchers (e.g. Yeboah and Appiah-Yeboah 2009) failed to disaggregate the ethnicity of *Kayayei* by market. The predominance of Mamprusi *Kayayei* is partly an indication of the high poverty in their region of origin and seasonal nature of agriculture which encourages cyclical migration to Accra during the slack agricultural periods. Moreover, the poor soil structure of Mamprusi lands makes agricultural productivity very low (Botchway 2001), forcing many to resort to migration as a livelihood diversification strategy.

The average age of respondents was 16 years with the modal age in the range of 11–20 years. Most participants were found to be in their youthful age (12–35 years) (Table 1). Migration often increases with age, however at a decreasing rate, an indication of the selectivity of migration on economically active age population. From the modal age (11–20 years), an inference could be made that head portering is confined to young girls, although elderly people may choose to engage in the activity for various reasons.

Most respondents were of child bearing age, and 4 (8.8 %) teenage respondents were pregnant during the data collection process. However, only one of them was married indicating the likelihood of teenage pregnancy among the *Kayayei*. Results on marital status indicate that about 51.5 % of the *Kayayei* were married, betrothed or living in informal union while 4.4 % had married before but are currently divorced, separated or windowed. However about 44.1 % had never married. Out of the 51.5 % married, only 24.4 % were living with their husbands and families in Accra, mostly in the slum area of Konkomba and Old Fadama. The remaining 75.6 % of married women had their families living in northern Ghana.

Respondents indicated that they occasionally travel to the north to spend time with their families. This reflects the non-permanent nature of head portering, where married women do not consider Accra as the place for permanent settlement as suggested by earlier researchers (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008). Many (55.6 %) respondents reported to have children with a mean of two (2) children each while the range was 1–7 children (Table 1).

The majority (48.9 %) of respondents had no formal education, 8.9 % had primary education, 28.9 % had middle/junior education and 13.3 % had secondary/vocational education. The low level of educational attainment among *Kayayei* in part is responsible for their increasing migration into southern cities. Private returns to education (i.e. benefits to the individual) in Ghana usually triple from primary to higher education and therefore determine an individual's employment prospects and future earnings (Ackah et al. 2014).

High poverty incidence in northern Ghana constrains many parents' investment in education, and socio-economic and cultural factors such as gender bias and rising school costs tend to favour investment in boys' education at the expense of girls particularly amongst Muslim families (Agyei and Ofori-Mensah 2009). There was a significant difference in the educational attainment of respondents compared to ethnicity ( $X^2 = 13.14$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). A highly significant association ( $X^2 = 29.24$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) was found between respondents' level of education and their occupation before migrating to Accra. Most respondents who had no formal education before migrating to Accra were engaged in farming and food vending compared to a few with secondary education.

#### The role of head porters in Ghana's market economy

As noted in the theoretical framework, migration provides an avenue for female young migrants to engage in livelihood activities. In this study, the business of head portering was the main livelihood activity engaged in by the sampled young female migrants in informal economy of the cities of Accra, Ghana. Among other things, data from our study indicate that the livelihoods of head porters contribute to three distinct outcomes; improvement in the living



standards of north–south female young migrants, enhancement in the living conditions of their familiar relations and kin up north via remittances and contribution to local economic development. Despite these contributions, the roles of these ‘tenaciously enterprising young females’ are often less stressed in the development literature as their efforts are regarded as unimportant to national development. This section provides the results on the contributions of female migrants livelihoods in the three areas identified above.

### Contributions to local level development

Analysis of the results obtained from our study indicate that the livelihoods of young female migrants (*Kayayei*) contribute to local level development through assisting in the distribution and transportation of goods, market exchange and payment of taxes which assist in development initiatives by city authorities in Accra.

#### *Assisting in market distribution and exchange system*

Survey results indicate that some of the *Kayayei* wake up as early as 4:30 am and 5:00 am to start their work, as the markets open at 6:00 am or earlier (Robertson 1983). Some respondents (17.8 %) started earlier, particularly those carrying watermelon and yam, who wake up by 4:00 am to off-load the products from lorry trucks from Agbobbloshie to Makola for early morning delivery. This finding is confirmed in early studies (Bowles 2011; Wilson and Mittelmark 2013). Table 2

reports the activities undertaken and the sectors engaged by the study participants.

It is important to distinguish between head porters and petty traders. While head portering involves carrying goods for customers for a negotiated fee, the business of petty trading essentially entails selling goods. We found that although our respondents were exclusively engaged in *Kayayei*, approximately 11.1 % of the respondents in addition to head portering were also involved in small petty trading activities such as selling fried and shelled groundnuts, ice water, or biscuits and exchanging coins for taxi and minibus (*tro–tro*) drivers during their resting periods. Those who were engaged in small petty trading activities especially during their resting periods stated that, they do that to supplement their meagre income. This is common among *Kayayei* in the Makola Market and its environs such as the Cocoa Marketing Board (CMB) area. This study does not seek to make the claim that *Kayayei* are petty traders. However, the business of trading serves as income supplementing strategy as we found in our study. This necessitates the need for further research on income supplementing activities of head porters in Ghana’s informal economy.

About 6.7 % of respondents indicated that although they are portering, they work for specific clients, bringing in items to sell and transporting customers’ goods. Wilson and Mittelmark (2013) also found that the *Kayayei* in Makola market worked as shop assistants. Contrarily, about 66.7 % of respondents reported to be working in all sectors by carrying the market purchases of customers (Table 2).

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of the activities and market sectors engaged by *Kayayei* (n = 45)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Activity undertaken in the market		
<i>Kayayei</i>	37	82.2
Petty trading (ice water, biscuits etc.)	5	11.1
Helping customers in shops	3	6.7
Total	45	100.0
Particular sector of the market		
Tuber market (yam/plantain)	7	15.6
Cooking oil and vegetable market	4	8.9
Fruit market	4	8.9
All sectors of the market	30	66.7
Total	45	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2014



### *Contribution to the generation of local revenue*

Another important means by which the livelihoods of female young migrants add to local level development is the payment of taxes. *Kayayei* make contributions to the Accra Metro Assembly (AMA) through the payment of a daily market toll of GH¢ 0.50 (US \$0.16). This amount as one may argue is meagre, however, considering the increasing influx of young females in urban Accra, who migrate to engage in head portering make us to appreciate the overall effect of this meagre tax to city authorities. Indeed the AMA has a relatively weak tax base and so market fees and *Kayayei* levies are one important source of internally generated funds. Among other things, sanitation remains one major challenge confronting urban Accra. Respondents indicated that the market tolls are collected to clean up rubbish in the market and bus stations which has the potential to contribute to improving sanitation in the city. As Samantha puts it:

They tell us that, we the *Kayayei* makes a lot of rubbish in the market and bus stations so we are charged for the money to maintain the market and stations (Samantha, Agbogloboshie).

Notwithstanding the potential role of tolls to support local economic growth, there appears to be inequities in tax collection (Leal Ordóñez 2014). Interviews with respondents and key informants revealed that, truck pushers and some market traders do not pay such tax. It would have been interesting to get the views of city authorities on this, but the researchers were unable to contact them.

Some respondents regularly face harassment from AMA Task Force when they default in the payment of market tolls, including confiscation of head pans and physical abuse, as Sueba, affirms:

Who are you to say you won't pay the GH¢ 0.50? You pay the money before you enter into the market because the AMA officials are always at the gate and moving in the market and inspecting our tickets. If you fail to pay, they take away your head pan meaning you can't work on that day". We the poor *Kayayei* are made to pay while the women in the market who earn so much often do not pay any fees. Do you think is fair for them to do that to us as *Kayayei*? (Sueba, Makola).

Both Maxwell et al. (2000) and Yeboah (2010) found that city authorities in Accra often charge traders and porters exorbitant market tolls, which reflects the institutional violence and repression by state authorities against young female in Ghanaian markets (Lyons and Snoxell 2005). This in essence reflects the role played by transforming structures and processes such as local government practices that affects the livelihood strategies employed by people, particularly young female migrants. In effect *Kayayei* contributes to revenue generation in the city of Accra for development although this is often not recognised.

### *Addressing transportation gap in the Ghanaian market economy*

Of considerable importance is the role of head porters in responding to the transportation of goods from shops and market centres to lorry stations for customers for a negotiated fee. Porter et al. (2012) have noted the role of women including our study participants in addressing the transportation gap in urban informal economies. Lowly skilled migrants (e.g. head porters) contribute to the functioning of the economies of destination centres by taking up jobs that may be classified as undesirable in the receiving regions (De Haan 2012; Winkles 2004). And without these low skilled migrants certain activities within the informal economy of receiving cities may collapse or come to a halt. In our own study we found that the activities of the head porters contribute to the distribution of goods from shops to lorry stations for customers. Indeed, young girls who migrate from northern regions to the cities of Accra and Kumasi to pursue *Kayayei* play a key role in the day-to-day running of Ghanaian market economies, by providing a flexible response to the choked market conditions. According to an interviewee, Mariama, *Kayayei* are crucial to both traders and buyers, as the lanes are inaccessible to trucks.

I help the yam sellers to carry their yams to their shops in the market after yams have been off-loaded by the trucks here in the market (Mariama, Agbogloboshie).

The above quotation succinctly captures the essential role of the *Kayayei* in addressing the transportation gap in a congested area such as the Agbogloboshie market. Contested space and the inaccessibility of

market lanes make it impossible to create spaces for cars and trucks. Trucks and buses therefore park along the road causing further congestion. As Munira and Rahina, added:

I strongly believe that without Kayayei, most people cannot come and shop here because they cannot carry their own goods on their head. As a Kayayei, I think I help those people so that they can also do their shopping (Munira, Makola).

In this Makola market, we the Kayayei help customers who carry their heavy goods from shops to their cars and bus stations. Even when the goods are heavier than us, we sometimes call the truck pushers (Rahina, Makola).

The later part of Rahina's statement indicates the gender differentiation in load transportation where men can use equipment such as hand trucks, illustrating the way in which gender norms are expressed through technology (Bray 2007). Thus by off-loading goods and carrying various items for people who come to shop in the market daily, the livelihoods of this female migrants play vital role in offsetting the transportation gap in the informal market economy although this specific contribution is often not recognised by researchers and policy makers.

Migration motivations and the role of head portering in the lives of young female migrants

#### *Migration motivations and opportunities*

In Ghana, gender is a significant social differentiation that determines migration. Among the reasons cited by respondents for their independent migration to Accra include: seasonal agriculture; lack of employment at home; the need for money to fund education or learning a trade; preparation for marriage; settlement of debts and the need to support families in women-headed households. In an in-depth interview, FuoZIA and Asana said:

Back in the north, you know that like this time of the year, we are planting on the farm and therefore there is no other work. The only thing you can do is to farm or sometimes trade. But since I know that I am poor and will not get

money to buy farm inputs or even trade, I have to search for something else that can give me money to help my children to go to school since my husband is dead. So I migrated to Accra to do Kayayei (FuoZIA, Makola).

I didn't want to come to Accra but my mother insisted that I should come and do Kayayei. She informed me that most of my friends who came to Accra are better off than me so I should also come. I want to go back to the North but when I call she says I shouldn't come because there is nothing there for me to do (Asana, Agboghoshie).

These quotes suggest finding work in head portering is a response to the decline in agricultural employment which has pushed many women in rural agricultural economies to seek alternative livelihoods. About 40 % of respondents were farming before migrating to Accra, suggesting the dominance of agricultural activities in rural Ghana (Shepherd et al. 2005). From Asana's statement, parental and family expectations play a key role in the migration decision making process where migration of young girls becomes parental investment. This finding is confirmed by other studies on north-south migration in Ghana (Kwankye et al. 2009).

Survey results on the length of stay in Accra indicate that about 42.2 % of respondents had stayed and worked as porters in Accra for <2 years while 20 % had engaged in portering for about 6–10 years. Many respondents whose migration is cyclical are students, farmers and married women who stayed between 3 and 18 months. Their occupation and family life therefore restrict their time away from home as confirmed by the key informant interview with the Ghanaian academic who said that porters with children born in Accra have no intention of settling in the North.

Unmarried respondents said they would stay in Accra until they have acquired enough assets and money, and were not certain of their return plans. Asset accumulation plays a major role in migrants' return decisions (Dustmann and Mestres 2010). Some respondents could therefore end up being permanent residents or long settlers, which challenges the assumption in some earlier studies that *Kayayei* do not aim to settle permanently in Accra (Yeboah 2010; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011).

Although head portering afford them the opportunity to earn, low income from work was a common experience by all respondents. Results on the income of *Kayayei* indicate that daily earnings range from GH¢ 0.50 (US \$0.16) to GH¢ 20 (US \$6.60) with an average of GH¢ 8 (US \$2.64). From survey results, about 15.5 % of respondents were earning less than GH¢ 5 a day while 42.3 % were making a daily earnings of between GH¢ 10 and GH¢ 20. Respondents maintained that their engagement in head portering attracts little and irregular income.

Interview data indicate that the ability to earn higher income or otherwise is determined by market conditions such as customer's generosity, and an individual's bargaining power. Current economic conditions (inflation rate-15.3 %) (Bank of Ghana 2014) have reduced consumers' purchasing power, thus worsening trading and market conditions. Many traders and customers are now unwilling to use *Kayayei* or pay more for their services as seen below.

The *Kayayei* work depends on your luck for the day, on a good day sometimes you can earn about GH¢ 50.00 but is not every day that you expect to get this money. On some bad days, you cannot earn anything even GH¢ 0.50 that you can use to buy pure water to drink. Now things are hard and customers are not willing to pay more for the *Kayayei*. Some people after you have carried their goods from Agboghloshie to Makola Market, they give you just GH¢ 1.00. When you complain, they say you are even lucky to get some loads to carry (Mariama, Makola).

It is important to state that, there is a clear gender gap in the earnings of market porters. We found that male

porters (truck pushers) work in groups and are able to use equipment in transporting goods compared to *Kayayei* (Fig. 4). For young female migrants, weaker negotiation skills, inability to carry bulkier goods, exploitation by customers due to the non-organised nature of head portering were cited by respondents as the main factors which contribute to low earnings.

#### *Employment creation for young female migrants*

The migration of young people to engage in head portering is key to providing employment avenue in the market economy. Survey results indicate that head portering was the only job opportunity readily available to the majority of respondents (88.9 %) as it does not require much capital and skills to start (Overå 2007). Although a starting capital ranging from GH¢ 20 to GH¢ 35 (US \$6.60–US \$11.50) is needed to purchase a head pan, some interviewees, especially new entrants indicated that they had the starting capital when migrating to Accra. Some on the other hand indicated to have borrowed head pans until enough capital was raised. In addition, the lack of education or job skills tends to push migrants into head portering. Aishetu, a new migrant from Gambaga captured the situation as follows:

There are no employment options available to me in Accra except *Kayayei* because I am not educated. You know this job does not need any special training; all you need is your head pan and your energy that you can use to carry the goods. I think *Kayayei* provides a quick means of employment (Aishetu, Agboghloshie).

In Ghana, the informal economy is known as a destination for individuals with limited education and



**Fig. 4** Comparing male porters working in groups with sophisticated technology and a *Kayayei* carrying client's goods independently by human labour in the Agboghloshie Yam Market in Accra. Source: Field Survey, July, 2014

skills where people like Aishetu can reduce her vulnerability to unemployment. Furthermore, the availability of work in Accra was a draw for new migrants, and respondents indicated that job opportunities in head portering provided the best option for work. As Alima and Munira at the Makola Market puts it:

When I was coming from the North last two years, I decided to go to Kumasi to work as a porter but my friends advised me that there is limited employment, so I should come to Accra which is bigger and there are more people here. To me when I came I saw that there were more employment opportunities in the Makola market but now the porters are many so the business is not all that good for me. But initially, the work was very good for me (Alima, Makola).

When your friends call you and you say there are no Kayayei jobs in Accra, they say, if there is no job, you come and see for yourself whether there are no jobs in Accra. To me, there are many markets in Accra than the North, so you can be employed as a Kayayei in these markets. The Kayayei job is readily available in Accra provided you make your mind to be a Kayayei (Munira, Makola).

Accra presents diverse employment opportunities in the informal economy, but only those with strong social networks can access jobs such as housemaid, shop assistant, or cleaner. Unfamiliarity in Accra becomes a challenge to new migrants who have little knowledge of the city's employment landscape. It is important to reiterate that when migrants arrive in Accra; their realities often overshadow their adventure narratives, as a result of wrong impression from friends, little knowledge of the city's employment terrain and increased competition by other migrants. Asana explained that:

Your friends sometimes call you on phone and inform you that when you come to Accra, you can easily do Kayayei because they are also doing Kayayei. But when I followed them and came to Accra, I have seen that there are no jobs at all. I sometimes sit under this tree and sleep for hours because when I roam in the market for load, no one even calls me, so how can someone

tell me that there are jobs in Accra (Asana, Agboghloshie).

Respondents also reported that the increasing influx of *Kayayei* has made load search very competitive although it provides social capital and information on job opportunities. This statement captures the competitive nature of head portering:

When the buses arrive at the station we all run to the cars in search of load and when there are about six people chasing one car for load, you can imagine how long it will take for one person to get even a load to carry in a day (Rashida, Makola).

Increased competition for loads often translates into lower earnings by *Kayayei*, which has implications for their earnings. Some studies have observed that the unceasing flow of migrants into southern cities has made the *Kayayei* business in Accra less lucrative with lower earnings (Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Wilson and Mittelmark 2013). Despite these concerns, generally the business of head portering is the major occupation of these young female migrants and their livelihoods play a crucial role in contributing to their living standards as elaborated in the next section.

### Head portering and standard of living

In evaluating the effects of head portering on standard of living, indicators such as access to income, healthcare and accumulation of durable assets were used. Migrants' assessment of their standard of living is presented in Table 3 which suggests that most respondents (68.9 %) perceived that their standard of living had improved significantly. Indeed migration has enormous benefits. It provides opportunities for employment, raises income and standard of living (Punch 2007; De Haan 2008). However, about 13.3 % reported to have witnessed deterioration after migrating to Accra, due to lack of employment opportunities, decent accommodation or low earnings. There was no statistically significant difference in assessment of standard of living between Makola Market and Agboghloshie Market ( $X^2 = 5.55$ ,  $p = 0.63$ ) and no significant relationship between respondents' length of engagement in portering and their living standards ( $X^2 = 3.73$ ,  $p = 0.44$ ). This implies that irrespective

**Table 3** Kayayei assessment of their standard of living in Accra (n = 45)

Current standard of living	Frequency	Percentage
Living standard has improved significantly	31	68.9
There has been no improvement in living standard	8	17.8
Living standard has deteriorated	6	13.3
Total	45	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2014

of the location of respondents and their length of stay in Accra, majority reported an improvement in their standard of living.

#### *Access to income*

The business of head portering as a migration diversification strategy affords young female migrants the opportunity to earn independent income. At least all our sampled participants in one way or the other were earning income from their work. While as many respondents (66.7 %) reported an improvement in their access to income, about 20.0 and 13.3 % claimed their financial situation has remained the same or deteriorated respectively. Nonetheless, respondents were of the view that they are able to earn higher income in Accra compared to their hometowns. Isha said:

Ever since I came to Accra, although life is not smooth as I want it to be, but I can say getting money here is better than the North. Here if you are able to work, you earn something small that you can save. I was selling groundnut in the North but I lost my capital so I borrowed from friends. Now I have save something which when I go back to the North, I will use to pay them. I think Kayayei has helped me to get some small money and is better than being in the North (Isha, Agboghloshie).

This suggests that despite the challenges confronting the head porters in the cities of Accra, they are still able to earn their own independent income which they can use in settling their debt or for other purpose.

#### *Access to health care*

The livelihoods of the female young migrants also contribute to accessibility of healthcare. Migration has long been noted as a means for people to access social amenities in other regions which are sometimes non-

existent in their relatively poorly developed sending communities (Winkles 2004). For our respondents, their ability to afford or access healthcare was largely because of the income earned from head portering. Survey results indicate that a significant proportion (60.0 %) had seen an improvement in their access to health care as a result of the improvement in income, while 26.6 % witnessed deterioration. Respondents who reported deterioration in access to health care attributed this to their inability to pay for registration for the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS). The NHIS is a pro-poor health financing initiative introduced in 2003 to provide equitable access to health care to all citizens (Arhin 2013), but most of the *Kayayei* interviewed (69.9 %) did not have an NHIS card. A few who had brought their NHIS card from the Northern regions were denied access to healthcare in Accra and had to pay for their treatments and drugs in hospitals.

One respondent said this:

When you send the NHIS card to the hospital, sometimes they will collect money from you instead of using the health insurance. I don't understand why you go to hospital with the card but still pay money in Accra. In the North, it is free. So what is the difference? This weekend I went to Ussher Clinic, they took GH ¢7.00 (US\$ 2.31) from me as the cost of the drugs (Christiana, Makola).

Survey respondents indicated that they are denied access because they are perceived as dirty. It would have been interesting to get the views of NHIS and health officials on this, but the researchers were unable to contact them. These young girls thus resort to off-the-counter medications in chemical shops, drug peddlers and traditional medicine while others also practice self-medication.

If you are sick, you go to the drug store and complain about your sickness. They will give



you some drugs to take. In some cases, you also go and buy drugs like QuickAction 'or Mala 2' especially when you have headache and malaria from the people who sell drugs around. In cases where I don't have money to go and buy drugs, I stay in the house till I get better by the grace of God (Faati, Makola).

Health constitutes an important aspect of human capital with its attendant effects on livelihood outcomes, particularly workers in the informal economy (Chattopadhyay 2005). In effect some of the head porters are not able to access healthcare due to exclusion on the part of health officials who are rather expected to provide protection. However their earnings from head portering afford them the possibility to buy drugs to cater for their health needs.

#### *Durable assets accumulation*

In-depth interviews indicate that respondents' perceive asset accumulation as a means of improving their socio-economic status and standard of living. Although income from head portering is relatively low, 82.2 % of respondents claimed that they are accumulating assets and improving their standard of living in Accra, compared to 17.8 % of respondents who thought that their standard of living had deteriorated since coming to Accra.

Some 68.9 % of respondents reported that *Kayayei* work had enabled them to buy cooking utensils, soaps, sewing machines and clothes, mostly on credit, as making direct cash payment is often difficult. This collaborates a study by Punch (2007):1 in Southern America, who found that young people's migration from rural Bolivia to Argentina offer them the opportunity to access and accumulate a range of assets and consumer goods in a globalised era. According to respondents, earning independent income and ability to save was crucial. For unmarried respondents, the acquisition of personal belongings helps them in preparing for marriage and improves their social status, as Maamuna said:

As a *Kayayei*, I have been able to acquire some personal items in Accra by buying six clothes with each cloth costing GH¢ 30.00 (US\$9.90) I am also working hard so that I can buy utensils for my future marriage (Maamuna, Agboghloshie).

When your friends come to the North, they arrange their items and show it to you, so you also wish that the items were yours but they are not yours. So your mind also tells you to come here to get what your friend too has gotten so that you can be like them. Now when I go to the North, I can also show some friends what I have acquired in Accra. When you go empty handed, your friends always laugh at you because they say you are lazy (Maamuna, Agboghloshie).

As noted by Kwankye et al. (2009), community level-influence especially from peers affects migrants' decision to acquire material possessions. In addition, survey results show that about 37.8 % of respondents were using mobile phones. The literature reports that migrants' standard of living is closely linked to their asset profiles because assets increase women's respect and empowerment in decision making (Agarwal et al. 1997; Shapiro and Wolff 2001).

Contribution to the enhancement of household income and standard of living

#### *Remittances*

The livelihoods of young female migrants also have implications for their left behind families via the sending of remittances. Survey results indicate that about 60 % of respondents send remittances to their families while 40 % claimed that due to low earnings they could not send remittances to their families. This high proportion of respondents who are able to remit to their parents is quite expected as it is one of the primary motivations for their migration to southern cities of Ghana. There was a statistically significant difference ( $X^2 = 5.71$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ) between ethnic groups and their ability to remit. The Mamprusi *Kayayei* were found to be the highest remitters among respondents. However, there was no association with region of origin ( $X^2 = 0.45$ ;  $p = 0.79$ ).

Analysis of results indicates that 27.7 % of respondents from the Upper East region were sending remittances to their families compared to 22.2 % from the Upper West region. The Upper East region has the largest lifetime outmigration in the country with a rate of 25.1 % (GSS 2013). Respondents reported remittances ranging from GH¢ 40 (US \$13.20) to GH¢ 300 (US \$99.00) every six months with an average of



GH¢114 (US \$44.18). Some 33.3 and 5.6 % of respondents claimed to be remitting an amount of GH¢ 100 (US \$33.00) and GH¢ 300 (US \$99.00) respectively at least once every quarter of the year. This finding is consistent with other studies on internal remittances in Ghana where money transferred by migrants is relatively low (Wouterse 2010) and confirms the assertion that people moving internally may have little capacity to remit huge funds to their left behind families (De Haan 2008).

Marital status was a major determinant of respondent's ability to remit to families with a statistically significant value of ( $X^2 = 12.2$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ). About 77.7 % of married respondent's remitted to their families once every quarter. This shows the extent to which dependent families rely on migrants for their upkeep. Remittances are sent to maintain intra-familial relationships (Carling 2008), and are seen as family obligations that migrants have to perform. Remittances thus become a family adaptive and diversification strategy in order to reduce risks (Cai 2003). A *Kayayei* migrated in order to send remittance to her husband who recorded total crop failure. She said:

I came to work as a *Kayayei* so that I can also support my husband because this year, my husband experienced crop failure as the rains came in late and therefore affected his crop yield. We borrowed money to farm but now, we can't pay so I have to come and work small to support him (Rose, Agbogloboshie).

Respondents also remit to their families to acquire wealth or physical assets, accumulate savings towards marriage ceremonies or help smooth household consumption. Thus migration *per se* is not the outcome of a family adaptive strategy but rather the flow of remittances.

#### *Mode of saving and sending remittances*

Many respondents (68.6 %) are able to save from their daily earnings, and in Accra, respondents could save more money than in the North. Some porters said that when they earn GH¢ 15 (US \$4.95), they save at least GH¢ 5–7 (US \$1.65–US \$2.31). According to Fisher and Weber (2004), for poor households, savings play a major role in providing economic stability and investment in children's education or business.

Some respondents said that they save their money with a *Susu*<sup>6</sup> savings collection group run by the *Kayayei* Youth Association while others save with friends. According to the *Susu* group leaders, there are currently about 300 registered clients mainly *Kayayei*. Respondents' reported that they did not meet the criteria to save with banks, and therefore prefer the *Susu* group. Some respondents also use the *Susu* saving group in their hometowns. Fig. 5 illustrates the saving or *Susu* savings booklet used by respondents.

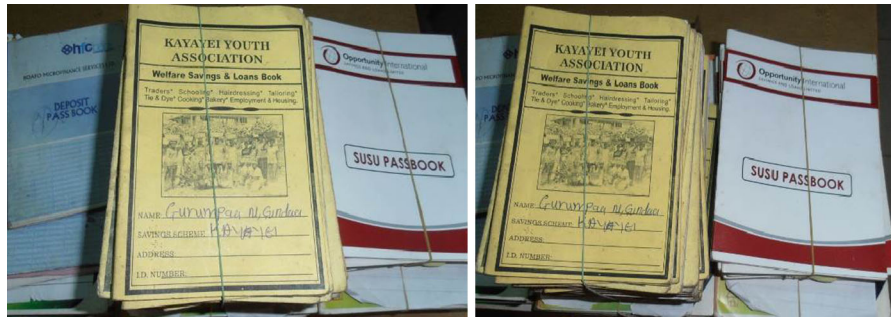
Some 50.1 % of remitting respondents send remittances by friends or relatives who are travelling north. A proportion (38.9 %) send money or goods (imported rice, clothes, soap etc.) by trusted bus drivers despite risks involved such as armed robbery and accidents. A small proportion (5.6 %) remits by 'mobile money' (via the mobile phone). Mobile money in Ghana, although in its early stages, it is gaining prominence as most wire transfers are in urban areas and are also prohibitively expensive (Tobbin and Kuwornu 2011). Other studies have found that many internal remittances in Ghana are sent through informal channels and therefore escape formal statistics (Awuse and Tandoh-Offin 2014). Improving financial openness would address the challenges associated with the transfer of internal remittances.

#### *Role of remittances in the lives of left behind households*

Survey results indicate that remittances play an important role in human capital formation, investment portfolios and the general well-being of households, help dependent families recover from shocks and reduce household poverty. In an interview, FuoZIA said:

My parents are now old and they cannot do any productive work in the North. I have also lost my husband three years ago, so there is no money in the house. I migrated to Accra to do *Kayayei*. Although, the *Kayayei* is not that good, I can still send them some money. They are currently better-off because they can have something to

<sup>6</sup> *Susu* refers to the informal credit rotation organisation used by people who have limited access to banking services. Money is pulled on either a daily, weekly or monthly basis and the total money is giving to one person at a time with small or no interest (Ardener 1964).



**Fig. 5** *Kayayei Susu* saving booklet. Source: Field Survey, 2014

eat compared to when I was in the North (Fouzia, Agbogbloshie).

Other studies have also shown that remittances contribute to the betterment of households and migrants in particular serve as bread winners of their families (Rao 2012). Survey results further indicates that remittances for children's education were the top priority for respondents. Migrants' remittance for education helps in increasing the enrolment and completion rates for migrant's children (Gyimah-Brempong and Asiedu 2014). Investment in education in the long-run serves as important social protection mechanism especially for poor households as it tends to reduce individual's vulnerability to poverty. One respondent indicated that sending her child to school is a way of improving upon the child's socio-economic status.

I send money to my mother to take care of my child who is in school. I know that the child will need school materials such as bags and uniforms, so part of the money is used for that purpose. Through this Kayayeji job, I have been able to look after my first born who has completed JHS this year (Barikisu, Makola).

Female-headed households in Ghana are more likely to use remittances to cater for the needs of children compared to male-headed households (Gyimah-Brempong and Asiedu 2014). Moreover, as indicated in the theoretical framework for the study, migrants' remittances may be more than just economic or financial resources that flow to migrant households in sending areas (Rose and Shaw 2008). Our findings collaborates earlier reports that reveal that young female's remit not just money but also building

materials, sewing machines, farm inputs, livestock and or other items for marriage as well as personal belongings or as savings which their parents benefits from (Anarfi and Kwankye 2005). It will have been interesting to get the views of parents and kin's of these young females regarding the role that remittances have on the household. We only had to rely on the accounts of the female migrants since we were unable to contact their families up north.

The qualitative dimension of the study with participants revealed that such transfers contribute to providing the consumption needs of households. It is also an avenue through which their parents are able to pay for school related expenses of their junior siblings (buying of text books, pencils and transport to school), purchase drugs when sick and hire casual labour to assist in the preparation of farm lands of households.

This networked geography of responsibility on the part of these female migrants could in effect contribute to increasing their social status especially upon their return to their communities. Overall respondents remit to their families to acquire wealth or physical assets, accumulate savings towards marriage ceremonies or help smooth household consumption.

## Conclusions and policy implications

Specialist literature on the lives of young females who migrate to undertake employment (*Kayayei*) in the informal economy as a livelihood diversification strategy in the Ghanaian context has largely been squeezed towards the dangers and diverse vulnerabilities associated with them. Although there is considerable evidence to suggest that many of the young

females involved in *Kayayei* undergo various socio-economic difficulties (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Oberhauser and Yeboah 2011; Yeboah et al. 2014), the business of head portering as livelihood strategy for young female migrants also has positive implications on the economy and the lives of those that engage in it as well as left behind families. Our aim in this paper was to assess the relevance of the livelihoods of young girls who migrate from northern to southern cities of Accra to engage in head portering.

The study found that *Kayayei* play a key role in local economic development through generation of local revenue, addressing transportation gaps and assist in market exchange system although this is often not recognised. Aside this useful contribution, head portering also has implications on the standard of living of the *Kayayei*. Many young female migrants through head portering are able to gain employment, earn income and are able to access healthcare, accumulate asset while others remit for upkeep of their kin's and relations back home in the north. This is particularly important especially in the wake where globalization and political restructuring of the global economy fuelled by the adopting of neoliberal policies have limited the role of government in directly providing employment for people in the economy.

We conclude that the space to make recommendations regarding the lives of the *Kayayei* is very narrow as there is relatively little research that addresses the various facets of their lives. Thus the contours to make useful suggestions will depend inter alia on more research, one that takes into account the diverse aspect of their lives. Nonetheless we argue in the interim for all stakeholders including government and NGOs whose mission are consistent with the welfare of *Kayayei* to organise them and make conscious efforts in supporting them with microcredit schemes. Well-designed microfinance schemes that provide access to savings and credit to the *Kayayei* could serve as a tool for escaping poverty and also improve their standard of living by supplementing their meagre incomes and savings from portering. There are schemes such as the Micro-finance and Small Loans Centre (MASLOC) and the Hawkers Empowerment Programme, which basically aims at equipping hawkers, head porters and food vendors with start-up capital to better improve their standards of living. These schemes need to be revitalized and scaled up to reach the throngs of head porters in Accra. Of fundamental to improving their

livelihoods also calls for informal training and skills development programmes which could assist some of them to diversify and or engage in multiple livelihood portfolios in areas such as micro enterprises. This could provide additional sources of income for many of them to enhance their basic needs including food, shelter and clothing. Lastly, while it may be difficult to practically prevent the migration of these young females, the onus lies on the central government to specifically target the northern regions and consciously make all the needed steps in improving the poverty conditions (i.e. the primary motivation for movement) by way of setting up small scale industries which can create the badly needed jobs while supporting existing livelihoods in the north. A northern development scheme such as the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) is therefore a step in the right direction. This is because the whole northern regions of Ghana have been left behind in the development process.

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